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IDEOLOGY, ECONOMICS AND THE SOCIAL CONTROL OF WOMEN IN  
SOUTHERN RHODESIA, 1910-1939

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## Introduction

In an effort to correct the colonial bias of written history, many scholars in the post-independence era have erred to the opposite extreme. They have blamed the ills of contemporary African society exclusively on the colonial past. In the case of Zimbabwe,\* such scholars have attributed the subordinate position of African women and their unequal access to the strategic resources of society to the economic policies of the settler colonial regime. Because settler capital needed cheap male labour, a system of migratory labour was instituted. According to government policy, women and children were left behind in the reserves, undertaking subsistence cultivation that would subsidise the sub-economic wages of African men. As the state undercut peasant agriculture, both to stem African competition with European farmers and to force African men to enter the labour market, women's economic contribution to household maintenance diminished. As wage earnings surpassed food production as the most important factor in household survival, women's social status deteriorated even further. Hence, the argument goes, women's unequal position in society today is due to European intervention in the African social order.

Critiquing the above thesis, this paper will contend that the origins of female subordination are not solely the result of European impositions. Rather, indigenous and European structures of patriarchal control reinforced and transformed one another, evolving into new structures and forms of domination. During the period under consideration (1910 - 1939), African women in Southern Rhodesia did not remain in the rural areas cultivating subsistence plots merely because it was functional for settler capital. African society, dominated by male elders, was also anxious to keep women and girls at home under the authority of their fathers, guardians, and husbands. Antagonistic as they may have been to other aspects of colonial administration, African chiefs, headmen, and male elders welcomed the government's efforts to restrict women to the rural areas.

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\* When referring to the colonial period, "Zimbabwe" will be called "Southern Rhodesia".

The colonial administrators of Southern Rhodesia were not known for their opinions of African women were even more disparaging. Colonial records are filled with adjectives purportedly describing African women: "indolent", "lazy", "slothful", "immoral", "frivolous", "savage", and "uncivilised" are only a few. Women were blamed for most of the ills of African society--adultery, venereal disease, unhygienic conditions, the lack of desire to enter wage employment and to otherwise become "civilised". In the opinion of the colonial officials, women were in no position to become "emancipated"--i.e. to attain majority status. They should remain under the firm control of their <sup>husbands</sup> lives.

In contrast to some of the missionaries, colonial officials did not regard women to be downtrodden beasts of burden. Rather, they were credited with having significant powers over their husbands and tremendous influence in societal decision-making--albeit negative. According to one native commissioner writing in 1924,

The women though wielding immense power over the men, are many centuries behind them in civilisation and absolutely unfit to be granted any measure of freedom for the present as their instincts are almost purely animal.<sup>2</sup>

Women were seen as lustful animals, unable to control their sexual urges.

As such, they were deemed responsible for drawing men into temptation and were thus "the principal offenders" in adulterous liaisons.<sup>3</sup> In the estimation of another native commissioner,

...90% of the Mashona women have immoral tendencies, are most irresponsible, readily give vent to their whims and fancies, and are void of all shame.<sup>4</sup>

Native Department officials went so far as to claim that the sex drives of African women and their overwhelming influence over their men lay at the root of the ever-present labour shortage. Rather than going out to work for Europeans, young able-bodied men were being enticed by women to remain in the kraals to satisfy female sexual desires.<sup>5</sup> Another official charged that, "At the present rate of retrogression, it is only a matter of time when every woman in the country will be a prostitute."<sup>6</sup>

If it were purely a question of race, African men would have been regarded in the same light as African women. However, gender as well as race entered the equation. The product of Victorian society, the European administrators did not hold women of any race in particularly high esteem. Their low opinion of women in general was compounded by their racial bigotry; African women were truly "at the bottom of the ladder."<sup>7</sup> In accordance with this double prejudice, an official writing in 1924 advocated the retention of laws that condemned African women to perpetual minority status:

Indeed, until quite recent years, this was the condition among our own race. The native woman of today has not the brain power or civilization of the mothers and grandmothers of the present white generation; her brain is not sufficiently balanced to allow her to think and act in all matters for herself, and I consider the male should be encouraged and assisted to exercise tutelage, within all reasonable bounds, over his women folk.<sup>8</sup>

If European women only recently had acquired the ability to conduct their own affairs, then African women certainly were in need of male guidance for generations to come.

#### Economic Motives for Controlling African Women

As the self-appointed trustees of African "advancement" and moral welfare, colonial officials deemed it their duty to punish the "moral laxity" of African women.<sup>9</sup> Prominent among the laws enacted toward this purpose was the Natives Adultery Punishment Ordinance of 1916. In the lengthy debate that preceded the passage of this act, the native commissioners exposed and interesting intersection of gender ideology and economic objectives. Pressing for the criminalization of adultery, the native commissioner of Mtoko wrote in 1914, "Adultery is becoming more and more frequent amongst Natives, and in almost all cases the women concerned are the wives of absentees at work."<sup>10</sup>

Rather than attributing the increase in adultery to the migratory labour system and the consequent disruption in family life, the official asserted that the problem lay in the fact that too few men were going out to work. The "more vicious and debauched characters" who spent "their lives in idleness in their kraals" were committing adultery with the wives left behind by the

migrant labourers. The fear that they would lose their wives was making African men hesitant to seek wage employment. However, if adultery were made a criminal offence, and men could be assured of their wives' fidelity in their absence, the official concluded, "there would be a marked improvement in the number of males turning out to work."<sup>11</sup> In the interests of economic development and the financial well-being of the territory, the sexual practices of African women had to be brought firmly under control.

#### The Maintenance of Law and Order

Apart from their economic objectives, the colonial administration has important political reasons for controlling African women's behaviour. If, for example, a woman deserted her husband "without just cause" and was "ordered to return to her husband by the Native Commissioner," he must be able to make her comply with his order. If he had no legal means to ensure the enforcement of his order, the woman would see that she was capable of disobeying "recognised authority, thus undermining all law and order."<sup>12</sup> According to one native commissioner, if adultery continued unchecked, African men would begin to resent "the inability of the white government to deal properly with the adulterers." Ultimately, he concluded, the problem "threatens to upset the peace of the native races under our control." Unless the government supports African men in exercising "their rights over the wives," not only the family, "but the whole existence of a nation" may be placed in jeopardy.<sup>13</sup>

British regard for the maintenance of law and order was rivalled only by their respect for private property. Not surprisingly, the severe punishment of adulterers found its justification in English property law. Providing a unique interpretation of African custom, the native commissioner of Ndanga noted that because an African man had paid lobola (bride price) for his wife, she was his property. Adultery, therefore, was "a serious breach of the rights of property only comparable with the more serious kinds of theft." He advocated that "the court should be authorised to assess damages" just as it did in the case of stock theft.<sup>14</sup> However, here the analogy ended. While the native commissioner called for the punishment of man and woman alike—as "in many cases (the woman) is the more guilty of the two"—he did not go so far as to blame the milch cow for enticing the cattle thief.

Just as African women were considered the "principal offenders" in cases of adultery, they were also held responsible for the growing rate of marital disintegration.<sup>15</sup> The official view of African women was that they were fickle and irresponsible, ensnaring and deserting men at will. In the words of one native commissioner, many "marry men of their own choice and within a few months change their affections and refuse to live with their husbands."<sup>16</sup> Colonial officials accused women of taking advantage of the "freedom of choice bestowed on them by the Native Marriage Ordinance." Whereas the administration had been attempting to prevent the marriage of African girls against their will, the girls had taken "this freedom...(as) a cloak for licence." They felt they had also been granted the "liberty to change their husbands as often as they please."<sup>17</sup>

Women were frequently charged with having left their husbands "without just cause or reason"-- although precisely what the government considered "just" was never specified.<sup>18</sup> The native commissioner of Goromonzi went so far as to maintain that,

In the majority of divorce cases the wife is in the wrong and in a great number of cases it can be traced to jealousy on account of the husband being married to a younger wife.<sup>19</sup>

Government officials were especially irked by the growing disregard of wives for the orders of their husbands. According to one irate official,

For some time, and in recent years in particular, I have noticed that the women assume a very arrogant, independent and indifferent attitude towards their husbands and take exception to any genuine remonstrance which he may make and this is very often pounced upon as an excuse for deserting him.<sup>20</sup>

Evidently African women and European men held very different opinions regarding the limits of a husband's prerogatives.

In an effort to coerce women into staying with their husbands, the administration employed a variety of mechanisms. According to custom, the payment of lobola conferred upon a man rights over his children. Thus, upon divorce, custody of the children almost invariably went to the husband. Through the manipulation of this custom, native commissioners' courts forced women to remain with their husbands-- as perhaps the lesser of two evils. According to one official,

The knowledge that she will be deprived of her children if she misbehaves or leaves her husband is a gentle stimulus to keep her in the path of virtue.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, the officials maintained, the knowledge that she will lose her children if her husband divorces her instills in a wife obedience and respect for his authority. As one native commissioner phrased it, "...she knows when she marries that if she gives cause for divorce she will be parted from her children." Thus, she is persuaded to keep to the straight and narrow, at whatever cost to herself.<sup>22</sup>

Children were awarded to their fathers not only as a deterrent against their mothers' desertion, but because their fathers' guidance was considered best for their moral welfare. The native commissioner of Goromonzi saw the benefit of allowing infants and small children to stay with their mothers. However, once girls were grown, they should be turned over to their fathers' care.

The great danger of allowing the girls to remain with their mother on reaching the age of puberty is that, in all probability, they would become common prostitutes, thus enabling the mother—who has all the gain and nothing to lose—to live in luxury should she be so inclined.<sup>23</sup>

African mothers were generally seen as unfit to raise their own children—unless they, themselves, were under male authority.

Lobola was another device used to keep African women in line. Although some officials warned that bride prices were inflating far beyond the means of most young men, thus creating a potential for social unrest, others felt that the growing magnitude of lobola payments had positive ramifications. One official described lobola as "the only corrective to a woman's tendency to go wrong." If a woman committed adultery or deserted her husband, her guardian would have to return the substantial lobola, causing severe financial distress to the woman's relations.<sup>24</sup> African elders, who had long since paid their own lobola and now looked forward to receiving bride price for their daughters, tended to concur with this opinion. At a Native Board meeting held at Goromonzi in 1932, a number of them indicated that

...nowadays women were picky enough anyhow, but... if lobola was reduced to a small amount there would be even less hold on them, as there was no doubt that the average girl, if tempted to leave her husband for no real cause, was at the moment influenced to a certain extent by the fact that her father had received a large amount of lobola for her which he would find difficult to refund.<sup>25</sup>

#### Patriarchal Control: A Bi-racial Effort

In justification of their crackdown on African women, the native commissioners

referred to a "mandate" bestowed upon them by African men. According to the Attorney General, C.H. Tredgold, the criminalization of adultery was recommended almost unanimously by officials and "natives" who had testified before the Southern Rhodesia Native Affairs Committee in 1910 - 11.<sup>26</sup> "Natives", of course, referred only to African men. In 1913, the chief native commissioner in Salisbury wrote that through out Mashonaland,

At almost every meeting of Chiefs held by me the chief topic of conversation is in regard to their wives and the way they run off with other men (chiefly aliens on mines) with impunity. The Chiefs are very bitter on the subject and would welcome an amendment to the (Native Marriage) Ordinance placing some restraint on their wives running away as they do.<sup>27</sup>

Other official referred to the "continual outcry" for the criminalization of adultery from "the more influential portion of the community." He maintained that the present law "does not meet the most urgent claims of the older and middle aged men"-- the primary constituents of the Native Department and those who discontent was to be most assiduously avoided.<sup>28</sup> The adultery ordinance was finally enacted in 1916 as a "result of continuous representations made by Chiefs, Headmen, Heads of Kraals and responsible natives throughout the country"-- that is, the African male elite of Southern Rhodesia.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of the passage of the Natives Adultery Punishment Ordinance, the situation did not improve--insofar as African men were concerned. Nearly two decades after the passage of the act, African men were still complaining to the government that their women were out of control. Native Boards, constituted in the 1930s as safety valves for African discontent, were popular fora for the airing of grievances concerning wayward women. In 1933, a member of the Native Board in the Goromonzi District spoke for many of his colleagues when he called upon the government to "arrest unmarried women in locations... also on farms and mining compounds." This sort of action, he claimed, would make them return to their fathers and guardians.<sup>30</sup>

African men and colonial officials alike believed that they would have more leverage over women if corporal punishment were inflicted. In 1931, a chief in the Goromonzi District suggested that the government impose such punishment on women "who made frivolous complaints" against their husbands. Endorsing the chief's recommendation, the native commissioner noted that "the same views were held in England not many



generations ago" and queried, "are we wiser than our forbears?"<sup>31</sup> A few years later, the members of the Goromonzi Native Board requested that the native commissioner inflict corporal punishment on girls who refused to return to their parents after having been found in the town locations.<sup>32</sup> Some years earlier another government official had suggested the public "birching" of women who left their husbands or guardians without "just cause."<sup>33</sup>

#### Restrictions on Women's Mobility

Throughout the 1910s through '30s, numerous complaints were registered by both African and European men concerning the ability of African women to move about without restriction. In 1913, several Manyika men working in Salisbury complained to the native commissioner of Umtali that there were three Manyika girls in the town location. As the girls were purportedly committing "all sorts of evil, going from one man to another," the complainants asked that the girls be forced to return to their fathers' kraals. Further, the men wrote,

...we wish if there is a law that shall never allow a Manica girl to come here and not let any of them ride the train from Umtali or from any of the stations and sidings, such as Odzi, Rusape, etc.

Despite the chief native commissioner's doubts that the writers "had any authority over the girls or the right to interfere with them," at the bidding of his Umtali subordinate, he found the girls and forcibly sent them home.<sup>34</sup>

The facility with which African girls and women gained access to "motor lorries" and trains was the object of criticism from numerous sources. In 1927, it was reported that several chiefs were calling for a pass system for women, in an effort to limit the number who "escaped" by taking trains to the urban centres. According to one native commissioner, it was far too easy for women to abscond:

If a woman has a grievance against anybody---if she has been smacked by her husband for not cooking properly---she is off by the next train.<sup>35</sup>

A few years later a chief in the Goromonzi District complained that girls and women "go out to farms and townships and mines" as prostitutes:

Our daughters go about everywhere because they are helped to travel by motor lorries. Also whenever a man punishes his daughter by beating for going away without the father's permission they complain to the police and the father is prosecuted.<sup>36</sup>

Given that the native commissioner himself encouraged parents to inflict "corporal punishment in mild form" on their errant daughters, the veracity of the latter statement is somewhat in doubt.<sup>37</sup>

While the male leaders agreed that African women should be prevented from "travel(ing) unchecked from one end of the country to the other," the method for restricting them was still a matter of debate.<sup>38</sup> In 1933, the native commissioner of Salisbury maintained that, "The remedy is to issue passes to travel to native women."<sup>39</sup> In that way, the marital status and guardianship of every woman could easily be established. Not many years thereafter the Salisbury Annual Report indicated that female visitors to the city would "receive no pass unless the consent of their husbands or guardians has been obtained."<sup>40</sup> Members of the Goromonzi Native Board proposed that marriage registration certificates serve as a form of pass document; no woman should be allowed to stay on European farms, in mining compounds or in town locations unless she could produce a marriage registration certificate.<sup>41</sup> Unmarried women, or at least those whose unions were not recognised under the Native Marriage Ordinance, could thus be identified-- and forced to return to the rural areas.

## Conclusion

During the colonial era in Southern Rhodesia, African and European men were united in their efforts to control the behaviour of African women. While African men sought to reassert their waning authority over women, their services, and their offspring, European men had a different agenda. In the economic realm, they were concerned with obtaining male labour. If it took the regulation of female sexual practices to achieve this goal, the colonial administrators were prepared to pass laws to that effect. In the political sphere, the administration was willing to help African men keep their women in line if it would mollify male discontent in regard to other issues. If the European administration was going to relieve African men of their power and authority in other areas, the least it could do was return to them the control of their women. For unless African men were in some way appeased, their growing disenchantment could jeopardize the whole colonial endeavour.

# FOOTNOTES

Unless otherwise indicated, all colonial documents are housed in the National Archives of Zimbabwe.

1. CNC S138/150, Native Commissioner (NC), Bikita to Superintendent of Natives, Fort Victoria, 12/3/24, ~~##~~ 26/24.
2. CNC S138/150, NC, Sinoia, to Superintendent of Natives, Salisbury, 23/2/24.
3. N3/17/2, NC, The Range, Charter, to Superintendent of Natives, Salisbury, 14/3/23, ~~##~~ 88/23.
4. Ibid.
5. N3/17/2, NC, The Range, Charter, to Superintendent of Natives, Salisbury, 7/5/14, ~~##~~ 579/500/14.
6. N3/17/2, NC, Hartley, to Superintendent of Natives Salisbury, 8/5/14, ~~##~~ 63/14.
7. CNC S138/150, "Native Marriage and the Status of the Native Woman," no. name or date. (ca. March 1924)
8. CNC S138/150, NC, Hartley, To Superintendent of Natives, Salisbury, 28/2/24.
9. N3/17/2, Acting NC, Wankie, to Superintendent of Natives, Bulawayo, 7/5/14, ~~##~~ 174/14.
10. N3/17/2, Acting NC, Mtoko, to Superintendent of Natives, Salisbury, 12/5/14, ~~##~~ 68/14.
11. Ibid. See also: N3/17/2, NC, Marandellas, to Superintendent of Natives, Salisbury, 4/5/14, "1/266/14; N3/17/2, NC, Goromonzi, to Superintendent of Natives, Salisbury, 8/5/14, ~~##~~ S.N. 354/14; N3/17/2, C.H. Tredgold, Attorney General. "Minute by Mr. Tredgold, Attorney General of Southern Rhodesia," 27/8/14; N3/17/4/1, CNC, Salisbury, to Secretary, Department of the Administrator, 9/5/13, ~~##~~ 25/1121/13; N3/17/2, Acting NC, Wankie, to Superintendent of Natives, Bulawayo, 7/5/14, ~~##~~ 174/14; N3/17/2, NC, Gutu, to Superintendent of Natives, Fort Victor: 12/5/14, ~~##~~ D.G. 7/150/14.
12. N3/17/2, Acting NC, Wankie, to Superintendent of Natives, Bulawayo, 7/5/14, ~~##~~ 174/14.
13. N3/17/2, Assistant NC, Umtali, to Superintendent of Natives, Umtali, 12/5/14, ~~##~~ 960.
14. N3/17/2, NC, Ndanga, to Superintendent of Natives, Fort Victoria, 18/5/14, ~~##~~ C 527/14.
15. N3/17/2, NC, The Range, Charter, to Superintendent of Natives, Salisbury, 14/3/23, ~~##~~ 88/23.
16. Ibid.
17. N3/17/2, Assistant NC, Umtali, to Superintendent of Natives, Umtali, 12/5/14, ~~##~~ 960.

18. N3/17/2, Acting NC, Wankie, to Superintendent of Natives, Bulawayo, 7/5/14, ~~N~~ 174/14.
19. CNC S138/150 NC, Goromonzi, to Superintendent of Natives, Salisbury, 7/3/24, ~~N~~ 30/24.
20. CNC S138/150, "Native Marriage and the Status of the Native Woman," no name or date. (ca. March 1924)
21. CNC S138/150, Superintendent of Natives, Fort Victoria, 11/3/24.
22. CNC S138/150, Assistant NC, Mtetengwe, to NC, Gwanda, 5/3/24, ~~N~~ 128/182/24.
23. CNC S138/150, NC Goromonzi, to Superintendent of Natives, Salisbury, 7/3/24, ~~N~~ 130/24.
24. CNC S235/475, Federation of Women's Institutes of Southern Rhodesia, "Report of the Standing Committee on Domestic Service, July 1930," Testimony of E.R. Morkel, p. 48.
25. CNC S138/47, Assistant NC, Goromonzi, to NC, Salisbury, 10/2/32, ~~N~~ 14/10/32.
26. N3/17/2, C.H. Tredgold, Attorney General. "Minute by Mr. Tredgold, Attorney General of Southern Rhodesia," 27/8/14.
27. N3/17/4/1, CNC to Secretary, Department of the Administrator, 9/5/13, ~~N~~ 25/1121/13.
28. N3/17/2, NC, Gutu, to Superintendent of Natives, Fort Victoria, 12/5/14, ~~N~~ D.G. 7/150/14; N3/17/2, Assistant NC, Umtali, to Superintendent of Natives, Umtali, 12/5/14, ~~N~~ 960.
29. N3/17/2, NC, Mtoko, to Superintendent of Natives, Salisbury, 12/3/23, ~~N~~ 26/23.
30. S1542/N2 (E-G), Minutes of the Native Board Meeting, Goromonzi, 12/10/33, p. 71; See also: S1542/N2 (E-G), Minutes of the Native Board Meeting, Goromonzi, 16/5/33, p. 2, Resolution ~~N~~ 3.
31. S1542/N2 (E-G), 2/7/31.
32. S1542/N2 (E-G), Assistant NC, Goromonzi, to NC, Salisbury, 25/4/34, ~~N~~ 63/224/34.
33. N3/17/2, Acting NC, Wankie, to Superintendent of Natives, Bulawayo, 7/5/14, ~~N~~ 174/14.
34. Manyika Workers, Argus Printing Co., to NC, Umtali, 19/9/13; NUA 3/2/1, Minute by CNC, 10/16/13. Quoted in Terence Ranger, "Women in the Politics of Makoni District, Zimbabwe, 1890 - 1980," unpublished paper, 1981, p. 13.
35. Quoted in Kersten England, "A Political Economy of Black Female Labour in Zimbabwe, 1900 - 1980" (Manchester University B.A. Honours Thesis, 1982), p. 53.
36. S1542/N2 (E-G), Minutes of the Native Board Meeting, Goromonzi, 12/10/33, p. 5.
37. S1542/N2 (E-G), Asst. NC. Goromonzi, to NC. Salisbury, 25/4/34, ~~N~~ 63/224/34.

At a Native Board meeting held a few months after the chief entered his complaint, the Goromonzi native commissioner exhorted the members:

When your children are naughty hit them with little sticks. It is your duty to punish your daughters. No one will interfere with you if you apply a reasonable punishment. But you must not take huge sticks and hit them hard on their heads.

(S1542/N2 (E-G), Minutes of the Native Board Meeting, Goromonzi, 24/4/34, p. 45.)

This sort of punishment, he commented later, will rectify "much of the obvious lack of respect shown to parents and elders"

(S1542/N2 (E-G), Ass. NC, Goromonzi, to NC, Salisbury, 25/4/34, #63/224/34.)

38. CNC S235/475, Federation of "omen's Institutes of Southern Rhodesia, "Report of the Standing Committee on Domestic Service, July 1930, Testimony of F. Hulley, p. 43.

39. S1542/N2 (E-G), Minutes of the Native Board Meeting, Foromonzi, 12/10/33, p. 6.

40. S235/516, Annual Report for the Salisbury District, 1939, p. 11.

41. S1542/N2 (E-G), "Resolutions Passed at Meeting of Native Board of Salisbury Native District Held at Goromonzi on May 5th 1933."



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